

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks on the United States Response to Unidentified Aerial Objects in North American Airspace and an Exchange With Reporters
February 16, 2023

The President. Good afternoon.

Last week, in the immediate aftermath of the incursion by China's high-altitude balloon, our military, through the North American Aerospace Defense Command—so-called NORAD—closely scrutinized the—our airspace, including enhancing our radar to pick up more slow-moving objects above our country and around the world.

In doing so, they tracked three unidentified objects: one in Alaska, Canada, and over Lake Huron in the Midwest. They acted in accordance with established parameters for determining how to deal with unidentified aerial objects in U.S. airspace.

At their recommendation, I gave the order to take down these three objects due to hazards to civilian commercial air traffic and because we could not rule out the surveillance risk of sensitive facilities. We acted in consultation with the Canadian government. I spoke personally with Prime Minister Trudeau and—from Canada on Saturday. And just as critically, we acted out of an abundance of caution and at an opportunity that allowed us to take down these objects safely.

Our military and the Canadian military are seeking to recover the debris so we can learn more about these three objects. Our intelligence community is still assessing all three incidences. They're reporting to me daily and will continue their urgent efforts to do so, and I will communicate that to the Congress.

We don't yet know exactly what these three objects were. But nothing—nothing right now—suggests they were related to China's spy balloon program or that they were surveillance vehicles from other—any other country.

The intelligence community's current assessment is that these three objects were most likely balloons tied to private companies, recreation, or research institutions studying weather or conducting other scientific research.

When I came into office, I instructed our intelligence community to take a broad look at the phenomenon of unidentified aerial objects. We know that a range of entities, including countries, companies, and research organizations operate objects at altitudes for purposes that are not nefarious, including legitimate scientific research.

I want to be clear: We don't have any evidence that there has been a sudden increase in the number of objects in the sky. We're now just seeing more of them, partially because the steps we've taken to increase our radars—to narrow our radars. And we have to keep adapting our approach to delaying—to dealing with these challenges.

That's why I've directed my team to come back to me with sharper rules for how we will deal with these unidentified objects moving forward, distinguishing between those that are likely to pose safety and security risks that necessitate action and those that do not.

But make no mistake: If any object presents a threat to the safety and security of the American people, I will take it down. I'll be sharing with Congress these classified policy parameters when they are completed, and they'll remain classified so we don't give our roadmap to our enemies to try to evade our defenses.

Going forward, these parameters will guide what actions we will take while responding to unmanned and unidentified aerial objects. We're going to keep adapting them as the challenges evolve, if it evolves.

In addition, we've derived—I've directly my National Security Adviser to lead a Government-wide effort to make sure we are positioned to deal safely and effectively with the objects in our airspace.

First, we will establish a better inventory of unmanned airborne objects in space—above the United States airspace and make sure that inventory is accessible and up to date.

Second, we'll implement further measures to improve our capacity to detect unmanned objective—objects in our airspace.

Third, we'll update the rules and regulations for launching and maintaining unmanned objects in the skies above the United States of America.

And fourth, my Secretary of State will lead an effort to help establish a global—a global—a common global norms in this largely unregulated space.

These steps will lead to safer and more secure skies for our air travelers, our military, our scientists, and for people on the ground as well. That's my job as your President and Commander in Chief.

As the events of the previous days have shown, we'll always act to protect the interests of the American people and the security of the American people. Since I came into office, we've developed the ability to identify, track, and study high-altitude surveillance balloons connected with the Chinese military.

When one of these high-altitude surveillance balloons entered our airspace over the continental United States earlier in the month, I gave the order to shoot it down as soon as it would be safe to do so. The military advised against shooting it down over land because of the sheer size of it. It was the size of multiple schoolbuses, and it posed a risk to people on the ground if it was shot down where people lived.

Instead, we tracked it closely, we analyzed its capabilities, and we learned more about how it operates. And because we knew its path, we were able to protect sensitive sites against collection. We waited until it was safely over water, which would not only protect civilians, but also enable us to recover substantial components for further analysis—for further analytics.

And then we shot it down, sending a clear message—clear message: The violation of our sovereignty is unacceptable. We will act to protect our country, and we did.

Now, this past Friday, we put restrictions on six firms that directly support the People's Republic Liberation Army—the People's Liberation Army aerospace program that includes airships and balloons, denying them access to U.S. technology. We briefed our diplomatic partners and our allies around the world, and we know about China's program and where their balloons have flown.

Some of them have also raised their concerns directly with China. Our experts [experts; White House correction] have lifted components of the Chinese balloon's payload off the ocean floor. We're analyzing them as I speak, and what we learn will strengthen our capabilities.

Now, we'll also continue to engage with China, as we have throughout the past 2 weeks. As I've said since the beginning of my administration, we seek competition, not conflict, with China. We're not looking for a new cold war.

But I make no apologize—I make no apologies, and we will compete. And we'll be—we'll responsibly manage that competition so that it doesn't veer into conflict.

This episode underscores the importance of maintaining open lines of communication between our diplomats and our military professionals. Our diplomats will be engaging further, and I will remain in communication with President Xi.

I'm grateful for the work over the last several weeks of our intelligence, diplomatic, and military professionals who have proved once again to be the most capable in the world. And I want to thank you all.

Now, look, the other thing I want to point is that we are going to keep our allies and the Congress contemporaneously informed of all we know and all we learn. And I expect to be speaking with President Xi, and I hope we have a—we are going to get to the bottom of this. But I make no apologies for taking down that balloon.

Thank you very much.

[At this point, several reporters began asking questions at once.]

China-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President—*[inaudible]*—overreaction——

Q. Why have you chosen Poland for your trip—*[inaudible]*?

Q. Mr. President, why did you wait so long to address the public on this matter, Mr. President?

Q. Sir, there's been a criticism—there's been criticism of this——

Q. When are you speaking to President Xi, Mr. President?

Q. Is this deal with China compromised by your family's business relationships in China, President Biden?

The President. Give me a break, man. *[Laughter]* *[Inaudible]*

Q. Sir—Mr. President—Mr. President, there's been criticism——

Q. Did you overreact?

Q. Mr. President, there's been criticism that this was an overreaction that was done because of political pressure——

Q. *[Inaudible]*

The President. I can't—

Q. Is your son still—*[inaudible]*——

The President. You can come to my office and ask the question when you have more polite people with you?

Q. Mr. President, why have you chosen Poland for your trip to mark anniversary of the war, and what's your message? What——

Q. When are you speaking to President Xi, Mr. President?

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:11 p.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to National Security Adviser Jacob J. Sullivan.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Aerial objects in North American airspace, U.S. response; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters, White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Blinken, Antony J.; Sullivan, Jacob J.; Trudeau, Justin P.J.; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: Canada, Prime Minister; Canada, relations with U.S.; China, high-altitude surveillance balloon in U.S. airspace; China, overseas aerial surveillance program; China, President; China, relations with U.S.; High-altitude, unidentified objects shot down by U.S. military; Intelligence gathering; National Security Adviser; North American Aerospace Defense Command; Secretary of State.

DCPD Number: DCPD202300116.